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Foreword

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The term ‘paranormal belief’ tends to be carelessly used as if it were referring to a monolithic belief in phenomena for which science has no explanation. Those of us who conduct research in this area are often approached by members of the public, journalists, even fellow academics, expressing their interest in ‘the paranormal’. In response to such enquiries, we first have to begin to unpack what particular aspect of the paranormal has piqued their curiosity. As Irwin demonstrates in this book, the paranormal is not a unitary concept. The term ‘paranormal belief’ encompasses different varieties of beliefs, including beliefs in psychic abilities such as extrasensory perception, precognition, and psychokinesis; beliefs in all-powerful deities and the power of prayer; beliefs in survival of the soul after death and the ability to communicate with the deceased; superstitious beliefs; beliefs that organisms can be healed, or harmed, through the direct action of mental intention; and beliefs that the earth is visited by intelligent alien life forms.

Parapsychologists, anthropologists, sociologists and psychologists have explored these beliefs from their own individual academic perspectives. Those from the first group tend to focus on beliefs in psychic abilities, and do not rule out the possibility that psychic abilities may be genuine. For this reason, part of their research investigates the relationship between belief in psychic ability and actual performance on controlled laboratory tests of psychic ability. Anthropologists and sociologists, in contrast, are not concerned with the ontological reality of paranormal beliefs. Rather, their interest focuses on the social and cultural function that such beliefs serve. Psychologists are perhaps the most sceptical about the accuracy of paranormal beliefs, and some of their work has proceeded on the assumption that such beliefs are basically misguided and maladaptive. Others retain a more open mind about the possibility that our current scientific understanding may be incomplete. Their work instead explores how such beliefs have arisen, and what psychological function they may serve. In this book, Irwin gives us a comprehensive overview of these different approaches to paranormal belief, before focusing on the question of the origin and psychological function of paranormal belief.

Not only do paranormal beliefs, *plural*, come in many different shapes and sizes, but in looking at the research it quickly becomes apparent that the different kinds of beliefs serve different functions. For instance, culturally supported beliefs, such as traditional religious beliefs, serve a different function from beliefs in extraordinary human capabilities such as mind-reading and mind over matter. Some beliefs may be functional, others dysfunctional. Perhaps due to the complexities surrounding the topic of paranormal belief, much of this

work has proceeded in little self-contained bubbles, with scant reference to the other perspectives or bodies of work. This leads to pockets of understanding that address one facet of belief, but ignore others. What is needed is a piece of work to set out and synthesise these different approaches, and this is what Irwin seeks to achieve with this monograph.

Those of a sceptical bent may question why so many researchers are apparently wasting their time investigating the causes and consequences of beliefs that are evidently false. If so, they miss the point. Paranormal beliefs are very widely held in the population: around the world, surveys consistently show that about 50 per cent of people hold one or more paranormal beliefs and, of these, about 50 per cent believe that they have had a genuinely paranormal experience. Regardless of whether these beliefs and experiences are 'correct', they are clearly an important part of what it is to be human. Paranormal beliefs occur in every culture around the world. Therefore academics have a responsibility to attempt to understand what causes these beliefs, and the consequences to individuals and to society of holding them. This much-needed book does just that.